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Reagan's Satellite Sell-Off Would Rip Off Taxpayers

The Reagan administration is hereby awarded the Nobel Prize for chutzpah. What other president would have the nerve to suggest selling the government's five weather and land-resource satellites to a private company at a big loss, and guarantee its profits for 15 years

HOBART ROWEN ECONOMIC IMPACT

while it buys the information back from the private company?

What other administration would strip its budget for funds for two Landsat satellites, crippling the program, and then claim it must transfer operations to the private sector to stay competitive with France and Japan?

What is involved here, as consumer advocate Ralph Nader said, "is a rip-off of the American taxpayer." Congress ought to let President Reagan know promptly that it makes no sense. "This is a grotesque giveaway; What's next?" asked Nader. "Maybe

they'll sell the FBI investigative services to the Wackenhut detective agency."

The real outrage is not so much that the government and taxpayers are certain to suffer an economic loss. It's the crass willingness of the Reaganauts to let weather information, which should be available to all citizens as a community service, degenerate into an ordinary commodity to be trafficked in for profit.

Information on land resources and weather is critical for the health and safety of everybody. Yet, we are now verging into a system where only those who have the money to pay for certain specialized information will get it. Snapped National Farmers Union representative Robert Denman: "This is symptomatic of this administration. It becomes a windfall for private weather organizations."

Reagan's plan is justified by White House press aide Larry Speakes on the dubious proposition that the satellites "would be better

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Planned Sale of Weather Satellites: Sham, Charade and Sweetheart Deals

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operated by the private sector. It calls for getting rid of the nation's four weather satellites and Landsat, the one satellite now operating to survey the Earth for crop and other resource information. Three ground-control stations would also be part of the deal.

Even the notion that the government would take bids is something of a sham and charade, because one company, the Communications Satellite Corp. (Comsat), appears to have the inside track for the sweetheart deal being arranged. If it goes through, Comsat will have a monopoly on selling weather information, and the Reagan administration will have perpetrated a mockery of the free-enterprise system.

The whole stupid proposal originated because the budget-pruners at the OMB, after having messed up the Landsat program by ill-conceived cuts in funding, decided that it would dump these remote-sensing satellites altogether. When no private company came forward to pick up Landsat, Comsat, which is not operated by fools, offered to take Landsat in a package deal if the government tossed in the weather satellites. The government would then guarantee that Comsat would not lose money by buying both weather and land information from it for the next 15 years.

What we see here is the ultimate idiocy of the hard-core antigovernment philosophy of the Reagan administration—the theory that the

less government the better, and the best government is none at all.

The notion that a private company could manage the satellites more efficiently is totally unproved. As a matter of fact, officials at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which operates the five satellites, told reporters after the White House announcement they couldn't confirm that selling the satellites would save any money.

To launch these satellites into orbit cost the American taxpayers at least \$1.6 billion. No one in the Reagan administration will say what the government might get back, but you can be certain that it won't be much. (Comsat would like to pay about \$300 million.) By guaranteeing the buyer a profit, NOAA officials concede that the government stands to lose hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

Consumer groups, like Nader's, are quite sure that the real effect will be either to raise the cost of getting weather information to those who had been getting it without cost before, or to reduce the general availability of vital data. Scientists express concern that in the hands of a private company, which must pay attention to bottom-line profits, some critical research will get short shrift.

And how about the Coast Guard? Since its own satellite isn't working, it's been getting weather information from NOAA. Must the Coast Guard now rely on a private company? Maybe we can sell the Coast Guard itself. And then, there's the Pentagon. Please look into that, David Stockman.